

Illegal sex workers access million-dollar taxpayer-funded health programme

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Sex workers, street prostitution around Hunters Corner Papatoetoe.
Photo / NZME

[By: Lincoln Tan](#)

Illegal sex workers are accessing a million-dollar taxpayer funded sex programme, a *Herald* investigation can reveal.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) funds \$1,099,944 excluding GST annually to the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) for health programmes across the country for sex workers.

In a response to an email enquiry by a local sex worker, the ministry confirmed that the services were "from time to time" being accessed by sex workers who are not legally able to work in New Zealand.

The programmes include sexual health and family planning, weekly sexual health clinics in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and needle exchange services in Tauranga and Auckland.

The ministry's service commissioning director Jill Lane said the prevention of HIV and Aids and the health, safety and welfare of all sex workers and their clients remained its "prime focus".

Family First national director Bob McCoskrie slammed the ministry and NZPC for using taxpayer money to "knowingly aid" illegal prostitution.

New Zealand legislation specifically excludes migrants holding temporary visas from being able to lawfully work in the sex industry.

"It is disturbing that both the ministry and NZPC are knowingly aiding illegal forms of prostitution in NZ, and using taxpayer funding to facilitate that work," McCoskrie said.

"Turning a 'blind eye' to illegal migrant workers will simply open up a huge

market for trafficking and exploitation which, based on local anecdotal evidence and international experience, will harm women."

Catherine Healy of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective. Photo / Ross Setford

NZPC national co-ordinator Catherine Healy said the collective runs five community-based programmes and had more than 10,700 engagements with sex workers last year.

The community bases were accessible to all sex workers - including those unlawfully here.

"We work with all sex workers in New Zealand and it would be irresponsible to ignore migrant sex workers in respect to public health as well as other concerns related to the potential for exploitation," Healy said.

"We are constantly reminding people involved in sex work of the relevant laws and certainly inform them of immigration laws if we believe they may be in breach of them."

New Zealand sex worker Lisa Lewis has written to the ministry to express her disgust.

Lewis said the services to illegal sex workers had been provided by MoH and NZPC "at the detriment of legal and local sex workers".

"The fact that the ministry and NZPC are using taxpayer dollars to assist illegals is appalling," Lewis said.

Lisa Lewis, sex worker. Photo / Brett Phibbs

MoH's group system outcomes manager Sam Kunowski rejected the claim that the ministry was "knowingly aiding" illegal activity.

"The ministry expects all providers we contract with - including the NZPC - to operate services that comply within any relevant New Zealand legislation, including Immigration-related legislation," Kunowski said.

The contract with NZPC included requirements for mandatory reporting and correspondence, he said.

Immigration New Zealand assistant general Manager Peter Devoy said neither the NZPC or MoH were required to provide any information to INZ regarding migrant sex workers they assisted.

"This is because working in the sex industry is not a criminal offence, even though it is a breach of temporary visa conditions," Devoy said.

"Any notification to INZ that a person is working illegally in the sex industry does not constitute evidence.

"If we are able to identify, locate and have evidence that a person on a temporary visa is providing commercial sexual services they can be served with a deportation liability notice."

In the last three years, deportation liability notices had been served to 38 people on temporary visas found to have engaged in commercial sexual services.

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